

Stages of Grief

Since Elisabeth Kubler Ross first published her *Five Stages of Grief* model in 1969, people have been using it as a tool to explain the normal process of coming to terms with a significant loss. Although no one's journey through grief ever follows quite the same roadmap, it can be helpful to know that what you are experiencing is as normal as it is painful. Death is an enemy, and whether you have experienced the death of a loved one, the death of a marriage, the death of a dream or some other kind of monumental loss, the process of grief is a spiritual battle. People often ask how long this process takes. While there is no specific answer to that question, you should expect some manifestations of grief for at least a one-year cycle of "firsts." Many people experience normal grieving for several years, but if you think it has been going on too long, it might be time to talk with a professional.

The stages listed below include Kubler Ross's original five plus a final stage called "Hope." Although they are somewhat chronological, people tend to live in several stages simultaneously, and you may even revisit stages you think you've grown out of. This, too, is normal.

Denial – Denial first occurs in the initial shock of learning about a loss and can persist for months or years. You might wake up in the morning having forgotten what happened or feeling that it has all been a bad dream. You may expect a loved-one's voice to come from the next room or feel unable to move forward because you are unconsciously waiting for your loss to be repaired. This is a normal, God-given defense mechanism which allows the brain to adjust slowly to a drastically altered reality. *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Ps. 73:26.*

Anger – You may have obvious reasons to be angry if your loss is the result of an injustice. Some people find themselves angry with a loved-one who has died or with God for allowing their particular pain. You may not even be aware of anger, yet find yourself short-tempered during this time. Anger is a natural human emotion which motivates us to right wrongs in the world. It can be a problem, however, when there's no real action we can take to fix things. *In your anger do not sin. Eph 4:26.*

Bargaining – Bargaining generally takes place in the mind. It might concern the past, turning into an obsession with "what if's." It might take the form of superstitions; for example, "If I don't cash his last pay check then he isn't really gone." Or you might bargain with God, promising Him things if He will just restore what has been taken. Bargaining is an understandable human attempt to repair the brokenness of this world and to change the will of the Lord. *Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Luke 12:6.*

Depression – When the reality of a loss begins to be accepted, a feeling of great sadness reigns. This is the feeling most people describe as "grief." Jesus, Himself, wept at the death of His friend, Lazarus. It is right that we should mourn the effects of the Fall – it's not supposed to be this way. Mourning is a natural reaction to great loss and a step on the path to healing. *The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. Ps. 145:18.*

Acceptance – Acceptance means beginning to live life in the present instead of the past. At this point you stop rejecting the loss which changed your world and make attempts to live within a "new normal." There are often symbolic changes which accompany this stage, such as giving away a loved-ones' clothing or redecorating the house to your own taste. *Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised. Job 1:21*

Hope – There is a real difference between grudgingly existing and embracing your new reality with the belief that purpose, meaning and even joy are possible for you. Hope does not mean forgetting or devaluing the things you've lost. It means incorporating loss into your soul in ways that make you stronger or more beautiful. It is a future concept. More than knowing you have to move on, hope means looking forward with some enthusiasm; it means dreaming. *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Jer. 29:11*

The questions below have been designed to help you personalize the *Stages of Grief* for your own situation. You may wish to use them to journal about your feelings and experiences during this time. Believe it or not, some of this will be hard to recall later.

1. Write a factual account of the loss you are currently experiencing, including what happened, how you first heard about it, and any subsequent traumatic events which are connected with it.
2. Make a list of the things you have lost, including both physical and emotional things, such as "financial independence" or "my identity as a married person." Then go back and number them according to their importance to you. This might take some time as you have probably lost things you haven't quantified yet. You may want to come back to this on several occasions.
3. Take each of the *Stages of Grief* and write about your own experience of them so far.
 - Denial
 - Anger
 - Bargaining
 - Depression
 - Acceptance
 - Hope
4. Do you feel that you have gotten stuck in any particular stage? What might be holding you there? What kind of help would you need to move forward?
5. How will you know that you have reached hope? How would your life be different than it is today?
6. When your heart has healed from this loss, what do you want to take with you from the experience that will enrich the rest of your life?

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, Ps. 23:4

Brothers, we do not want you to ... grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 1 Thess. 4:13

*I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD.
Isa 45:3*